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City of Seattle Referendum Process FAQ

Note: This document is available in [PDF format](#) (38Kb), which requires Adobe Acrobat Reader or equivalent program.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ's)

1. Does the City of Seattle have a process for a citizen referendum?

Yes. Refer to City Charter, in particular Article IV, Section 1, H through M; and to Seattle Municipal Code (SMC), in particular Chapters 2.12 and 2.16.

2. Is there a published guide for citizens, to help them understand the process?

Yes. The Office of the City Clerk publishes a "Guide For Citizens' Referendum: An Information Resource for Citizens." Download this guide at <http://clerk.seattle.gov/~public/citizenguides.htm>.

3. When can I begin gathering signatures for a referendum?

Signatures can be gathered once the Council and Mayor have acted on the ordinance. Once the Council delivers the passed ordinance to the Mayor, he has up to 10 days to approve or veto it. If the Mayor vetoes the ordinance, then the council must override the veto by a 2/3 vote or the ordinance will not take effect (City Charter, Art. IV sec. 12).

Petition signers must date their signatures in order for the signature to be considered, so it is important that you not begin gathering signatures before the Council and Mayor have taken action on the ordinance. If you have questions in a particular situation, you may check with the City Clerk before you begin to gather signatures.

4. How long do I have in which to gather signatures?

Petition signatures for a referendum must be submitted to the City Clerk before the ordinance in question takes effect. Ordinances generally take effect 30 days after the Mayor approves them or the Council overrides the Mayor's veto. (City Charter, Art. IV Sec. 1 J and Art. IV Sec. 12). You should check the "effective-date" section in the original ordinance to see whether the standard "30 day" provision applies, or if a different effective date was established.

Regardless, it is important to remember that the referendum petition must be submitted before the ordinance takes effect. For example, if the ordinance has the standard 30 day effective provision, you would need to submit your petition signatures on or before the 29th day after final approval of the original ordinance.

Sometimes the provisions of an ordinance are not in effect until much later, but the ordinance establishing the 'law' is effective as indicated in the effective date section. (EX: Ordinance 122752 establishes a fee for disposable shopping bags. The ordinance has the standard 30 day effective provision, so the ordinance itself was effective 30 days from July 30. The fee, however, was not scheduled to be in effect until January 2009, as stated in Section 1 A of that ordinance.)

5. Do I need to obtain approval of my referendum before gathering signatures?

Neither the charter nor the SMC requires approval of a referendum petition prior to its being circulated for signatures. However, there are legal requirements as to the format of a petition, so it is always a good idea to talk with the City Clerk before you begin to gather signatures.

6. How many signatures would I need to gather?

In order for your petition to qualify as a referendum, you would need to gather enough valid signatures to represent 8% of the total number of votes cast for mayor in the last mayoral election. Example: 2009 Mayoral race – 206,286 votes were cast, so until the next Mayoral election, 16,503 valid signatures of registered Seattle voters will be required to qualify a referendum. Most signature gatherers collect more signatures than are actually needed, in order to allow for the possibility that some signatures will be rejected because the signer is not a registered voter, or for some other reason.

7. Can I bring in signatures throughout the gathering period?

You may only submit petition signatures initially when you have at least the required number. After your initial submission, additional submissions are accepted in accordance with the Clerk's established guidelines for subsequent submittals. But remember, at least the required number of signatures must be submitted within the specific signature gathering period for your particular referendum (refer to FAQ 4).

8. How do the signatures on the petitions get verified and how long does that take?

The City Clerk delivers the petition pages to King County Elections. King County Elections compares the signatures to voter registration records, and notifies the City Clerk when a) they have verified at least the minimum number of required signatures are valid, or b) they have completed checking all signatures and there are fewer than the minimum required number that are valid.

State law does not set a specific deadline by which King County Elections must complete signature verification, but it is required that the verification be conducted with "reasonable promptness."

9. What happens if there are not enough valid signatures?

What happens if there are not enough valid signatures depends on the circumstances, dates of submittals, termination

dates set by King County for petitions, etc . If your petition is determined not to have sufficient valid signatures, the City Clerk will contact you and discuss next steps and/or options for you.

10. What happens if there are enough valid signatures?

The City Clerk notifies the City Council, and the Council must pass legislation authorizing King County Elections to place the matter on the ballot.

11. On which ballot will my referendum appear?

The City Council has the option of placing the referendum on the ballot either at the next regularly-scheduled election, or at an earlier special election. Deadlines by which the City must submit measures to King County Elections are set by state law. In addition, the Council could authorize the measure to be on the ballot for a special election in February, March, April or May. The City must submit measures to King County 52 days in advance of these special-election dates.

12. What if the voters approve the measure, ie. the majority vote in favor of the ordinance that has been referred?

Then the Mayor issues and publishes a proclamation declaring the original ordinance to be in effect, the same as it would have been if there had not been a referendum. This proclamation must be issued and published within five days of the certification of election results from King County Elections.

13. What if the voters reject the ordinance, ie. the majority vote 'no'?

Then the original ordinance passed by the Council and approved by the Mayor does not take effect.

14. Where does the ballot title come from?

The City Attorney prepares the ballot title, in accordance with provisions of state law, once the petition is determined to contain sufficient valid signatures.

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07/16/2010